

A General in a Classroom Takes On the Ethics of War

NOTRE DAME, Ind. — Three years after Robert H. Latiff received his star as a brigadier general in the Air Force, the United

ON RELIGION

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States prepared to invade Iraq. A military man since 1974, General Latiff was hardly an innocent in matters of warfare, including the one being declared by President George W. Bush against global terror.

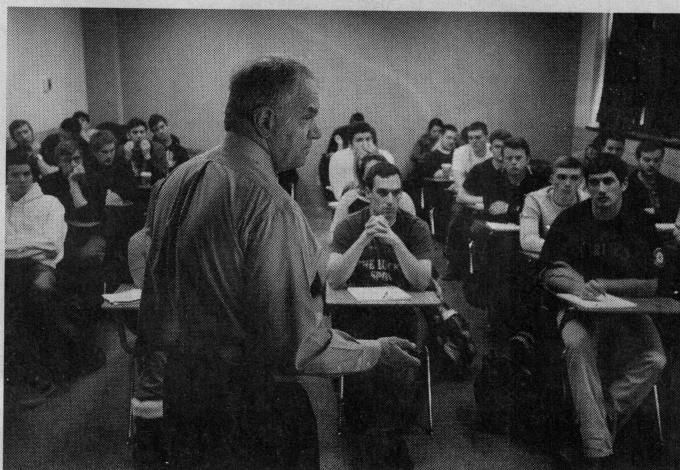
General Latiff, after all, had lost one of his neighbors on Sept. 11, 2001, as a passenger in the first plane that crashed into the World Trade Center. He had supported sending troops into Afghanistan to defeat Al Qaeda.

Yet General Latiff harbored enough doubts about the wisdom and logic of assaulting Iraq that he considered retiring in protest. His mentor, a four-star general, told him not to bother. Nobody would notice the act of conscience of a mere brigadier.

So General Latiff stayed in the active military until 2006, earning the rank of major general and the Distinguished Service Medal. Meanwhile, he winced at the photographs of atrocities at Abu Ghraib and reluctantly signed stop-loss orders extending soldiers' deployments. "I didn't act on my deeply held disgust," he recalled recently. "And that still claws at me."

That acute sense of self-criticism also helps explain why Dr. Latiff, 63, now wearing the blue blazer and oxford shirt of a professor with a Ph.D., strolled into a classroom at the University of Notre Dame one afternoon last month for the opening session of Philosophy 20628. The course is called "The Ethics of Emerging Weapons Technologies," and it is a forum for both Dr. Latiff and his students to grapple with the moral meaning of arms.

The syllabus, as Dr. Latiff explained to his 35 or so undergrads, centers on the arsenal of the high-tech era: drones, cyberwarfare, robotics, data mining, soldier enhancement by prostheses or drugs. Just because we have these weapons, he asked



ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Robert H. Latiff teaching a course, "The Ethics of Emerging Weapons Technologies," at the University of Notre Dame.

the class, should we use them? If we use them, how can we stop others from using them? The search for answers to such questions will occupy the semester.

And while the hardware is new, the questions are not. The assigned readings, dealing with the ethics of war, include Thucydides and Thomas Aquinas. In his first lecture, Dr. Latiff went back in time to 1139, when Pope Innocent II banned the use of that era's cutting-edge armament, the crossbow, against Christians. He mentioned the American decisions to firebomb Dresden and drop atomic bombs on Japan in World War II. Drawing closer to his own era, he spoke of Agent Orange, the toxic defoliant used in the Vietnam War.

"At the time, it was an expedient thing to do," he said, using words that could well apply to drones today. "It helped us find the enemy. But was there anyone who thought about long-term consequence? I contend there was nobody."

In trying to be such a somebody now, it is no mere coincidence that Dr. Latiff devised Philosophy 20628 specifically for Notre Dame. He earned all three of his degrees here. He studied Catholic theology and existential philosophy against the backdrop of the countercultural 1960s; simultaneously, he served in the R.O.T.C. as part of the military

social teaching, the fact that just-war theory began with Aquinas. Notre Dame makes no bones about the fact it brings a moral, theological, ethical view to national questions. That's its reason to exist."

Indeed, Dr. Latiff teaches the course with a doctoral candidate in the philosophy of science, Charles H. Pence. They draw students from the R.O.T.C. and peace studies, from philosophy and engineering. For all of them, the semester culminates in a collaboration with several classmates to write a policy for the ethical use of a next-generation weapon.

"When you think of philosophy, you think of Aristotle and Plato and old people, and it seems outdated," said Elizabeth Terino, 21, who took the course in the spring semester last year as a sophomore. "Here you have a philosophy course that's relevant to the modern world. You can wake up and read a newspaper about the use of drones in Yemen and say, 'Oh, we were talking about the international law about that yesterday.' So you can ask yourself, 'I wonder what made them make that decision.' It makes it very real-world."

In his real-world life, Dr. Latiff has written forcefully of his concerns about "emerging robotic armies" with "no more than a veneer of human control." He has served on a committee that is producing a report on ethics and new weaponry for the National Research Council. It will be the subject of a conference at Notre Dame in April.

From his lectern, however, Dr. Latiff offers questions far more often than anything resembling an answer. What he sees, in turn, is a kind of dawning revelation, one that reminds him of his own.

"Most everybody in the military, including me for many years, felt that if war fighters need something, we should get it to them with the fewest impediments," he said. "And many of the students start out with a blasé attitude: 'The military needs this kind of stuff.' It's not till I start scratching the ethical issues that they warm up. And once they get thinking, they're on a roll."

scholarship that was the only way he, the son of a shopkeeper in Appalachia, could have afforded a private university.

"Quite an unusual mix," as he put it recently.

In his military career, too, Dr. Latiff traversed borders. He held leadership positions overseeing the research and development of advanced weapons for both the Air Force and the C.I.A. Yet the intelligence agency also sent him to an executive seminar in Aspen, Colo., based on a "great books" curriculum, where he spent two weeks of 12-hour days discussing moral thinkers from Plato to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. Latiff's own ruminations often turned to the profusion of new weapons. "There was nothing that struck me as terrible and awful," he recalled, "but there were a few things that made me worry."

So in 2010 he took his questing intellect and restless conscience back to his alma mater with a proposal for a new course. Notre Dame requires all undergraduates to take two classes apiece in philosophy and theology. And in a deeper way, the course about weapons and ethics fit uniquely well.

"There's no better place than Notre Dame to be thinking about these kinds of issues," Dr. Latiff said. "The whole body of Catholic